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Mapping Digital Sociology: An Introduction to Its Themes, Scholarship, and Growth

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Abstract

Most of us now live in a society increasingly shaped and mediated by digital technologies. This reality has led to the intellectual recognition of digital sociology as a significant and evolving subfield within the broader discipline. While the West has taken an early lead-evident in citation indexes and scholarly output-Indian sociology is only beginning to engage seriously with the vast possibilities of the digital domain. This article offers a needed systematic introductory overview to the emerging field of digital sociology, tracing its scholarly development and thematic contours. Aiming for both global and contextual relevance, it positions the subfield not as a radical break from traditional sociology, nor as a marginal or trivial pursuit. Instead, it presents digital sociology as a legitimate and necessary area of enquiry deserving sustained, focused, and critical engagement. The article concludes by outlining four key domains of engagement through which digital sociology can be meaningfully developed in India-thus serving both an informative and developmental purpose.

Keywords

Digital sociology, Digital anthropology, Digital society, Scholarship, Themes.

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1. Introduction

For many practicing sociologists, the emergence of a sub-field termed digital sociology may naturally evoke the question-why?—and often triggers a degree of skepticism. After all, we are living in an era confronted by urgent global challenges such as environmental degradation, climate change, ethnic conflicts, democratic erosion, and the rise of populism. In response, one might argue that such crises are not entirely new; they have long occupied the sociological imagination. Moreover, critics may contend that sociology already possesses a well-established repertoire of theories, methods, and analytical frameworks—so what justifies the need for yet another addition to the discipline? Others might dismiss the digital realm as a hyperreal spectacle, dominated by vulgar memes, fleeting reels, and viral videos that appear to erode traditional socio-cultural values rather than enhance them. Given these reservations, the proposition of a sociology dedicated to studying digital technology may seem both novel and contentious. Yet, addressing this skepticism requires a return to sociology's historical foundations and a deeper examination of its evolving relationship with technological change.

There is no wonder that sociology, since its formative days, has been fascinated with the role of technology in society. Social changes initiated by the mighty industrial revolution and rapid developments in modern sciences shaped the ideas of early sociologists. Comte integrated the technology within his idea of a positive age of the mankind, a threshold of his law of three stages, where he celebrated the rise of techno-scientific apparatuses. Marx went even further, analyzing technology within his conception of mode of production and rise of capitalism. He referred to tools such as plough, handlooms, steam mill etc. and emphasized their role in and relationship within production process. Along with studying implications of machines on production, pricing, costs of commodities and labour, he offered an account of the intertwining nature of technology and society. Initially, emphasizing their historical role and contribution to social development, he quickly took a critical stance towards technologies which perpetuate alienation and exploitation of the labour. Drawing upon Marxian streak, Weber also studied industrial, architectural, military even music technologies (e.g. Piano). However, he showed his ambivalence, regarded them subsuming in the mighty force of rationalization. Simmel

placed them under his study of objective culture, which tends to dominate the subjective culture, leading to the tragedy of culture and loss of internal meanings. Durkheim framed technologies within his theory of division of labor in society, where technologies perpetuate specialization and more complexity in the task divisions. Later, sociologists such as Veblen, Ogburn, Merton, Mumford etc. have said a great deal about the role of technologies in society.

Though, now sociological classics, majority of early sociologists framed these reflections under their broader generalized schemes, where they were trying to divulge into the circuits of modernity and emerging structures and processes of the period of great transformation. They were certainly not thinking about the internet, computers, the smartphone, or platforms like Google or Youtube, forget about the artificial intelligence (AI), the internet of bodies (IoB) or internet of things (IoT), who nowadays, likely to invoke a feeling of awe and wonder but often tinged with skepticism and fear. However, some of their thoughts have stood the test of time and remained relevant in theorizing technologies and their social consequences.

Surely, early ideas on technologies, despite being relevant, have gaps in the context of the digital turn (Ritzer, 2013). Selwyn (2019) argues that the true inheritor of classical and modern sociological reflections on technology has been Science and Technology Studies (STS). It developed during 1970s, where previous insights were further sharpened to offer fresh ideas, such as Winner (1986), who formulated his conception of Technological Politics, which questioned the common-sensical notion of technological neutrality and the role they play in the reproduction of power relations. However, quite contradictory, Bijker, Hughes and Pinch's (1987) Social Construction of Technology (SCOT), questioned prevailing technological determinism and privileges society, culture, and community in shaping technology usages. Meanwhile, the idea of a 'gendered technology' was also pushed by emerging techno-feminist scholarship during 1970s and 1980s, which raised questions over the marginality of women in technology, and their role in furthering patriarchy. To solidify perspective, examples were given of domestic technologies such as dishwashers. The field enriched by the posthumanist contribution of Haraway's (1985) *A Cyborg Manifesto*. However, a more optimistic work was done by Plant (1996), where cyber-feminism was seen as challenging patriarchy through alternative channels of communication and articulations.

Where early antecedents of STS comprise schools such as history of technology, philosophy of science and sociology of knowledge, later, during mid 1990s, ethnographic studies and cross-cultural, comparative analysis of folk usages and peripheral populations de-eliticizes the whole field. Remarkable contributions were made by Latour (1993), Forsythe (1994) and Pfaffenberger (1992). The anthropological interventions into STS

helped bridge the rift between science and culture, which was more prevalent in early studies, and brought the question of man, users, experiences and the mundane into centre of attention.

Parallel scholarship also flourished under substantive headings such as information society, knowledge society, informationalism and post-industrialism. Sociological works such as Bell's (1973) *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* was regarded as a major contribution in capturing a new mode of social organization geared around the centrality of machines and technologies in the production process, flourishing of service sectors, science-based industries and rise of data processing. A work of seminal importance came from Castells' (1996, 1997, 1998) *Information Age Trilogy* (*The Rise of the Network Society; The Power of Identity and The End of Millenium*) where he became successful in conceptualizing the empirical basis of a new techno-social paradigm as Informationalism, where information production, processing and channelization has gained a central position in productivity and power. Later, he published additional works such as *The Internet Galaxy* (2001), where he traces the development of the internet and political, economic, and techno-scientific forces behind it. Also important are the *Communication Power* (2009), and particularly, *Mobile Communication Society: A Global Perspective* (2007), which was written in a collaboration with the co-authors working in the field of mobile communication studies. The main part of the work is that it has referred to scholarly works in non-western countries and eastern societies from Asia and African countries and gave specific attention to the empirical investigations of mobile media.

Alongside aforementioned endeavours, interdisciplinary fields such as New Media Studies, Mobile Communication Studies, Internet Studies also flourished with the share of contributors from different fields of social sciences in general and sociology in particular. Scholars such as Rheingold (2000, 2002), who popularized neologisms such as 'virtual community' and 'smart mobs'. Wellman (2004), who is well known for his work on the internet and network. Baym (2015), who addressed the popular myths surrounding digital media implications. Livingstone (2002, 2009), widely recognized for her work among children and young people's digital media usages, including social concerns on children's parenting in digital society (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020). And Wajcman (2014) and Bittman and Co-authors (2009), now cited for interrogating time pressure in digital society and work-home spillover debate, are classical works, capturing different dimensions overlapping with digital sociology scholarship. These intellectual developments were published in many dedicated book series and journals with specific reference to new media, mobile communication and digital technology and society.

Such an overview demonstrates that technology has long been a central concern of sociological theorizing, and digital sociology should not be viewed as disconnected from earlier developments in the social sciences broadly, and sociology specifically. Interest in the digital arose due to the speed and depth of contemporary transformations, which pre-digital sociology often struggled to explain. The novelty lies in the particular historical moment when a group of enthusiastic scholars recognized opportunities in prior insights and the constantly evolving social and research context—connecting the digital sphere with sociology and envisioning new possibilities across methodological and empirical domains. Consequently, a distinct body of scholarship emerged as digital sociology, aiming to understand how new communication technologies shape our social, cultural, political, and economic lives—and how, as bearers of social structure and culture, we in turn respond to them. It draws upon an existing foundation of scholarship, with its own concepts, methods, procedures, questions, debates, and evolving empirical themes.

2. The Term and Emerging Research Themes

The term digital sociology first appeared in French literature as a keyword—‘digital visual sociology’ (Losacco, 2007). However, its formal origins can be traced to American sociologist Jonathan Wynn’s (2009) work, where he reflects on the integration of digital technologies in sociological teaching and research, highlighting emerging challenges and opportunities. A major milestone came with Orton-Johnson and Prior’s (2013) edited collection, which collectively explores the incorporation of the digital into everyday life and calls for moving beyond conventional binaries like virtual/real and presence/absence. Their volume offers a nuanced and insightful account of the complex and often messy terrain of digital society, focusing on key sociological themes such as social relationships, spaces, community in the digital age, inequalities, finance, networks, mediation, as well as education and healthcare practices.

In addition, the first monograph came from the Australian Sociologist, Deborah Lupton (2014) whose work titled *Digital Sociology* has become the basic text of the field. Besides attempting to theorize emerging aspects of digital society, it also reconceptualizes the whole idea of sociological practice and conducting social research itself. Her definition of digital sociology encompasses a four-fold typology. *Firstly*, professional digital practice, based on incorporation of digital tools by sociologists to conduct and share research outputs, build their professional profile, and direct students. *Secondly*, analysis of digital technology use, referring to the study of how technology usages affect people’s sense of themselves, their implications for relational configurations and production and reproduction

of social institutions and structures. *Thirdly*, digital data analysis, using digital data which is either quantitative or qualitative. And *finally*, critical digital sociology, a reflexive analysis of digital supported by the insights of social and cultural theories (Lupton, 2014: 15-16). Other books in the field such as Jessie Daniels and Colleagues' (2016) edited work titled *Digital Sociologies*, Noortje Marres' (2017) *Digital Sociology: The Reinvention of Social Research*, and Neil Sylwyn's (2019) *What is Digital Sociology?* are foundational works. A comprehensive reading of studies and traversing across references of digital sociology gives a glimpse into four classical and analytically separable areas of investigation; socio-cultural; politico-administrative; economic-consumptional and methodological-procedural.

Socio-culturally speaking, digital sociology has focused on the nature of social interactions, relationships and emerging digital cultures. In the socio-interactional area, the main question lies in their reconfigurative implications on physicality of social interactions. It has been observed that digital, particularly mobile communication, has transformed our traditional sense of presence by allowing ubiquitous social connectedness, where social actors are permanently reachable and addressable (Ling & Donner, 2009), which is consequential for the way people interact, organize and negotiate relations, bringing new layers of complexities in everyday social accomplishments. Inspired by the anthropological work of Marcel Mauss, Taylor and Harper (2003) extends the notion of gift in text messaging among young people, which helps in establishing reciprocal ties. Wajcman (2015) also maintains that digital usages foster connections between social groups such as friends and family. However, this line of enquiry build upon old school philosophy of social functions of materiality has been critically interrogated by Turkle (2011), fearing that digital interactions may fall into shallow relations and loneliness. Besides, it has increasingly associated with the theme of bodies, self and identities where digital devices such as mobiles, smartwatches etc. were seen as culturally wearable technologies like ornaments of tribes, which remain tied to the body as an extension of it. The question of self expression has taken another dimension where scholars have reflected upon offline and online selves and often mutual and contradictory relationship between them. Some have attached digital technologies and their personalizations such as wallpaper, ringtones and overall visual themes with sociological variables like gender, age, religion etc. Additionally, digital has been related to topics such as social capital, public-private dynamics, social solidarity, rituals, cultural reinforcement-change, quantified self, digital avatars etc.

In the politico-administrative sphere, the major issue relates to the changing dynamics of power and control in digital society. Studies have incorporated insights from the works of post-structuralists such as Michel

Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. A reinvention of Foucauldian work on Panopticon, disciplinary power, biopolitics and governmentality required decluttering the operationalities of new technologies and techniques of control in the digital society. School (Hope, 2016) and state agencies and private advertisements (Lyon, 2014) were seen indulging in perpetual monitoring of their subjects through microrecording and evaluating the digital data. Additionally, digital tracking devices also allow self regulation techniques, where people microregulate their thoughts and conduct. The debate on more participatory, normalized and familial surveillance practices (Lupton, 2016; Marciano, 2022) were also built on extending early insights on empirical data.

Additionally, it was asserted that in such post-panopticon times, control no longer has physicality, but is more distant, combined with new techniques of remote control via digital technologies. Many worked on Deleuzian ideas and explained that there is an individual body and a data body in cyberspace, and the efforts are made to monitor and control the data body. An example could be a google search history and cookies which lack a physical body but embodies in the form of a data body, in whom advertisers work upon to control to maximize their profits. Governmentality took another step in the digital society where techniques such as online login, passwords, access given, access denied, forced updates etc. were pushed for regulating common people. Moreover, algorithm are seen as filled with prejudices, motive driven and non-neutral. In a nutshell, we can say that the power in digital society is more remote, decentralized, minute and more insidious to track. Besides, studies have also taken up the issue of movements in digital society, whose operational structure seemed to be determined by the networking logic (Castells, 2015), where the crowd gathering and protesting mechanisms have become significantly transformed, however, many suspects digital activism as 'slacktivism', devoid of real political engagement and meaning. A rather more pragmatic area deals with governance and civic engagement in digital society, where digital has seen serving the policy interests such as m-government schemes and e-programs in various spheres spanning from education, health and numerous citizen services. Digital sociology opens the doors of critical evaluation of the delivery process and motives of these initiatives.

In the economic-consumptional field major questions raised by digital sociologists relate to the changing nature of capitalist enterprises, transformation of work, productivity, profitability, consumption, labour relations and exploitation, and development. Many works have drawn inspiration from Marxian theory and integrated them into digital Marxism. Ideas like 'communicative capitalism' (Dean, 2005) and 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek, 2017) were produced to explain the capitalistic

modus-operandi in the digital age, where data acts as a raw material and the control over its ever-circulating flow constitutes the basis for productivity and power. Capitalistic digital platforms like Facebook, Google, Amazon, Alibaba etc. were seen as not just tech-companies but monopolistic business enterprises, who heavily rely on user data, whose information is sold to generate profits. It's all built upon a whole data-centric business model, which is meticulously designed. Additionally, many studies have articulated a great deal about changing labour dynamics in the digital society, where labour has seen more fragmented and discrete (such as gig workers, hourly workers, on-demand workers) due to their temporary positions in the organization of work, lacking union solidarity in traditional senses. The control is furthered by advanced surveillance mechanisms, and ratings are used to exert pressure and extend control upon labour. Other studies focus on the changes in existing jobs. For example, in journalism and media labour in general (Cohen, 2015a; 2015b), there is a growing trend of automated reporting, quick news production based on data mining and content collection, unpaid content provided by online audience, freelancing and citizen journalism. The news givers are judged based on the metric of content viewing, clicks etc.

Another thread relates to the issue of economic development, where economists have generally taken a technocentric approach. Take for example, Jenson's (2007) study of Kerala's fisherfolk, where mobile was found improving sale co-ordination of sardines, allowing for remote price negotiation, which reduces transportation cost, price variability, and brings efficiency. Such positive correlations were also found in studies such as those of sub-saharan Africa (Aker & Mbiti, 2010) and in Morocco (Ilahiane & Sherry, 2009), others have taken a more rounded approach and evaluated its role in community development (Goggin & Clark, 2009). Though pro-development studies remain crucial in informing research and policies, they face vigorous challenges, particularly from anthropological, ethnographic and causally complex studies anchored upon fieldwork traditions. For example, Horst and Miller's (2006) research among poor Jamaicans and Wallis' (2013) study of marginalized workers of China have shown that despite serving socio-communicative functions, digital devices like mobile does not necessarily lead to new businesses, better income or agency, and sometimes they increase the financial load from whom the mobile help has sought. Tenhunen's (2018) study of Janta village, West Bengal also critically interrogated flat development discourse and found intersectionalities of business benefits, where mobile benefits well-off groups. Mixed development discourse is a classical example of how differences in approaches brought differences in finding in digital research.

The consumptional debate on the digital draws on traditional sociological categories of production, consumption and transformed into prosumption and digital consumption.

In the methodological-procedural domain, it is observed that digitalization has produced a datalogical turn to social inquiries, where the traditional quantitative and qualitative methods are underpowered. Therefore, the debate has reconfigured as big data vs thick data, based on the demands of techno-data-social centric, and live methods. Initially, attention was given to big and broad social data flowing across cyberspace, on the internet and social media (such as tweets, Google search, keywords etc.). These data sets are sometimes deliberately put on by administrative agencies and business platforms. The hindsight is that the big data would elucidate structured patterns among unstructured, ever flowing huge data sets of social behaviours, thoughts and action patterns. It urges us to work along computational social sciences and use of techniques such as data mining, modelling, mapping large data sets, keywords etc. However, the big data analysis has been criticized for being shallow, ridden with machine bias, excluding the complexity and depth of socio-cultural context in which the data has emerged.

The rediscovery of anthropological sensibilities in digital resulted in increasing emphasis on thick data, digital ethnography and a rather more general association with digital anthropology (Miller & Horst, 2012: 3-35). It is based on certain time tested idea systems such as the recognition of the dialectic (such as virtual-real; presence-absence; commoditization-decommoditization; global-local; abstraction-differentiation; universal-particular etc.), the culture and false authenticity (fallible tendency of seeing digital as mediated, in-authentic, un-natural and virtual, while real world as un-mediated, more authentic, natural and real), emphasizing holism (considering polymedia, and broader media ecology), considering voice and relativism, ambivalence of openness and closure and finally, normativity and principle of materiality. No wonder, there is clearly some affinity between these principles and the style of research and theorizing in anthropology which employ the notion of context, culture and interrelationships. These ideas help de-dogmatise prevailing uninformed, usually taken-for-granted notions of thinking and doing digital research.

Additionally, many studies have focused on the need to formulate new methods, approaches and perspectives, and have been successful upto certain extent in the process. A bunch of digital sociologists have emphasized the importance of digital tools in promulgating enquiries as well.

Figure-1 demonstrates four major realms of occupation of global digital sociology research on next page.

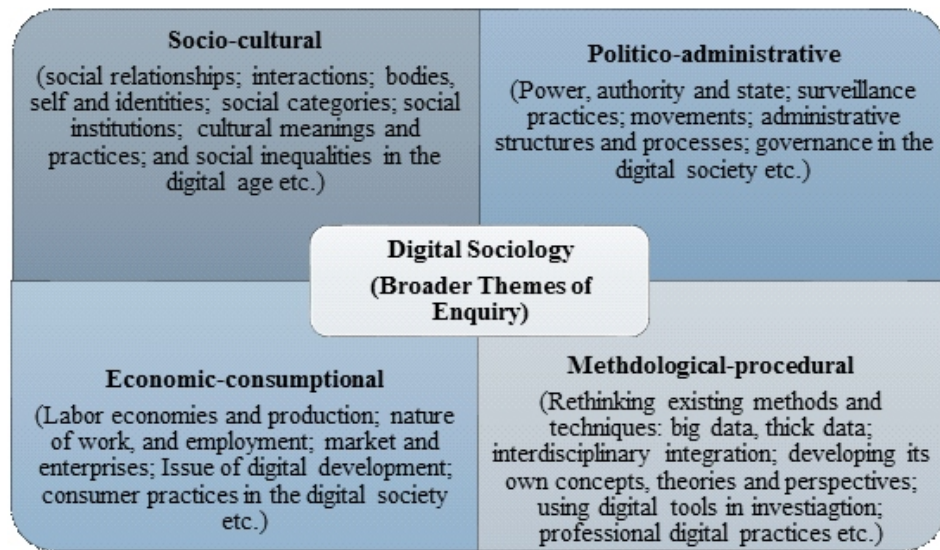


Figure-1: Four-fold Themes of Enquiry

Drawing upon scholarly works, six points of contention could be made:

1. Digital sociology advocates integrating new technological features and their usages into core areas of sociological concerns such as instantaneous communication and labour exploitation, internet and power relations and control etc. It views rather more technical concepts from computational sciences such as the network, data, algorithm, platforms through sociological lenses.
2. Like other sub-branches, digital sociology often revisits early time-tested sociological questions, themes and insights by re-using and re-framing them in the emerging digital environment. By doing so, it draws on a body of long intellectual heritage to explain the emerging structures and processes of contemporary digital society, reasserting sociological knowledge as a cumulative and connected process.
3. Despite inhering a rich body of insight into social structures and processes from pre-digital sociology, it does not undermine the sheer importance of cross-disciplinary learning. It gains from the works in computational sciences, anthropology, politics, design, philosophy, linguistics, geography and other realms of knowledge as well. It also aims to incorporate findings from various fields such as Internet Studies, New Media Studies, Mobile Communication Studies etc. No wonder, such practice leads to a more hybrid theorization based on an interdisciplinary input. This collaboration also intends to bring action element into digital sociology, which may chart out the map for solving real societal problems in the digital age. It reminds us of the

traditional association of sociology with both general and specific branches of knowledge.

4. Digital sociology seeks to explore the aftermath of the digital. Meaning instead of being overwhelmed by the digital, it critically navigates the gaps and grey areas of the digital such as fatigue, disillusionment, inequality, addiction etc.
5. Digital sociology moves beyond the binaries of virtual-real, absence-presence, offline-online but rearrange them in a continuum. In this way, it retains the philosophy of a world consisting of humans, machines and the digital as well.
6. Digital sociology is not merely about understanding the usages, impact, cultural appropriation and incorporation of the digital, but it also involves integrating digital into study, which unfolds a new way of inquiring, investigating and interacting with research participants. In this manner the digital is not only an object of investigation but a modality for doing sociology as well.

3. Professional and Institutional Recognition

Digital sociology, as a sub-field of sociology, is steadily gaining global recognition. Naturally, professional associations have shown increasing interest in it. The first was the British Sociological Association (BSA), which established a dedicated research group on digital sociology in 2012. Soon after, the Australian Sociological Association (TASA) followed suit by organizing its first digital sociology forum during its annual conference at Monash University, Clayton, in 2013. In the United States, the Eastern Sociological Society made a significant contribution by hosting a conference in New York centered on digital sociology, thereby formally acknowledging the field. Gradually, other sociological associations and societies began recognizing the growing relevance of digital sociology, establishing their own research branches. Among them, the most notable is the International Sociological Association (ISA), which acknowledged the digital's ubiquity by forming a thematic group in 2020. This group was later upgraded to Working Group 10 on Digital Sociology in 2024, and the first mid-term conference was held at the University of Warsaw, Poland—signifying that digital concerns could no longer be marginalized. Following this trend, the Indian Sociological Society (ISS) established its first research group, initially titled Adhoc Group-01 on Digital Sociology, which has now developed into a full-fledged research committee.

Alongside the formation of specialized branches by professional bodies, numerous academic programs have emerged worldwide. In 2013, Goldsmiths, University of London, launched the first-ever master's

program in digital sociology. This was soon followed by programs at the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow, and Virginia Commonwealth University in the United States. Later, courses were also introduced at the University of Warwick and the University of North Texas. The digital has not only attracted sociologists; other allied disciplines have also embraced the opportunity to explore it. Most notably, social anthropology has shown close engagement, prompting calls for a separate sub-discipline of digital anthropology. A cohort of practicing anthropologists—interested in ethnographies of mobile phones, the internet, and social media—came together to reconceptualize digital technologies not as mere technical tools but as cultural constructions, emphasizing human agency, meaning, and context. As a result, supported by a growing body of research, several academic programs have been introduced. The most well-known is the MSc in Digital Anthropology at University College London (UCL), which led to landmark ethnographic work such as *How the World Changed social media* (2016). In this project, Daniel Miller and colleagues produced pioneering comparative studies across countries like England, Chile, China, India, Brazil, Trinidad, and Italy. Another significant program was launched by the London School of Economics (LSE), offering a graduate course in digital anthropology. Today, digital themes occupy an important place in anthropological journals and conferences, both in India and internationally.

In South Asia, precursors to digital studies are typically located within science and technology studies (STS), the sociology of media, culture and communication, and mobile communication studies, where the socio-cultural implications of mobile phones, social media, and technologies are broadly explored. Courses explicitly titled with 'digital' are more recent interventions. In India, the International Institute of Information Technology, Bangalore (IIIT-B) has pioneered an interdisciplinary master's program called 'Digital Society'. Similarly, the Department of Society-Technology Interface, School of Social Sciences, Jaipur, has collaborated with IIIT-B to offer a two-year MSc course with the same title. IIT Jodhpur has also made significant strides by launching 'Digital Humanities' under its Interdisciplinary Research Division (IRD), offering MSc and PhD programs in key digital domains such as AI, new media, digital culture, digital heritage, multimodal data analytics, and digital ethnography. However, it seems that the sociology departments of Indian universities have largely left the responsibility of digital education to IITs and other specialized institutions. Despite increasing relevance—and the inclusion of some digital-related content in university curricula—there remains a lack of a distinct course specifically titled 'Digital Sociology'. Its overlapping themes are often subsumed under existing areas such as globalization and

society, media, culture, and STS. It is no surprise, then, that if digital sociology is to truly develop in India, it must be institutionalized as a standalone syllabus in Indian universities—beyond the margins of STS or media studies—despite its shared concerns with them.

4. A Four-fold Approach for Indian Context

It is no surprise that digital sociology remains a relatively new entrant in India, despite the presence of overlapping domains such as science and technology studies (STS) and media studies. For digital sociology to develop meaningfully in the Indian context, a fourfold approach is necessary—encompassing teaching and research, methodological engagement, professional activities, and policy orientation. However, this path is also fraught with several challenges and complexities.

The first step involves incorporating digital sociology into teaching and research. In terms of research, numerous papers and several books of national and international repute have been published, covering themes such as the digital divide, development issues, implications for urban and rural India, e-governance, digital diffusion, and its political economy. Additionally, several unpublished dissertations available on Shodhganga reflect valuable contributions by research scholars across India. Paper presentations on digital themes are also increasingly common at academic seminars. However, many relevant topics remain underexplored in detail, including panoramic surveillance and power; disability in the digital age; organizational and labour issues in digital India; inequalities in access, skill, and usage of computers, internet, and smartphones across demographic groups; as well as concerns around agriculture, gender, caste, religion, political participation, and educational disparities in the digital era. Other underexamined areas include shifting dynamics of family, marriage, and kinship, and tribal culture, identity, and self-management in the digital age. In fact, there exists a significant research gap within the social sciences on mobile communication in India (Chauhan, 2020), which now forms a core area of digital inquiry. Moreover, the field calls for more connected and informed scholarship, which can only be achieved through a sustained engagement with global literature using comparative strategies that trace both similarities and differences in digital studies. The increasing tendency among newcomers to frame standalone studies—whether on AI, digital divides, or other exotic topics—may prove unproductive if not grounded in robust, systematic, and analytically sound international literature reviews. Merely generating paper titles with digital buzzwords based on journalistic impressions or common-sense notions—without employing foundational sociological tools such as classification and comparison—does little for those sincerely aiming to understand digital

society through a sociological lens. In teaching, there is a need to introducing a separate syllabus in graduate and Ph.D. courses on digital sociology in Indian universities. And along with thematic areas mentioned earlier, scholastic works done by digital sociology scholars should also be included alongside a specific focus on Indian context by the inclusion of local socio-cultural categories, and policy issues related to digital development, literacy, inequality and detox. It also requires focusing on the integration of digital tools, and training of techno-data skills to faculty members for teaching and doing digital sociology.

Methodologically speaking, Indian digital scholarship must grapple with certain inherent problematics, which can be crystallized into four analytical threads. These often remain implicit until one engages in empirical investigation. First is the selection of an appropriate unit of analysis. Should one focus solely on the virtual? Or treat the real world as shaping the virtual? Or should a more balanced approach be adopted – and if so, how sustainable is that balance in practice? Second is the issue of determinism and causality. Researchers must confront how causal connections are established, raising the question of analytical priority in digital research: should technological variables be given primacy? Should social variables take precedence? Or is a balanced interplay necessary – and how might such balance be empirically achieved? The third challenge involves the unwanted intrusion of moral panics and prevailing binaries, which complicate efforts to move beyond normative judgments about the digital. This includes long-standing dilemmas around dichotomies in technological research such as digital optimism vs. pessimism, presence vs. absence, and virtual vs. real. Fourth is the issue of context. While the first three concerns are broadly cross-societal, the fourth is field-specific, requiring scholars to engage carefully with the particularities of their research sites-demanding the selection of appropriate categories and analytical methods rooted in contextual relevance.

The establishment of an Adhoc Group on Digital Sociology and its recent elevation to a full-fledged research committee (RC-30) is a welcome development. The Indian Sociological Society (ISS) has demonstrated its commitment to the field by initiating several professional digital practices – such as recording online webinars, sharing informative content on social media platforms, and creating hybrid (online/offline) forums for discussions on various aspects of digital society. However, further interventions are necessary. There is an urgent need for a dedicated All-India Sociological Conference (AISC) centered on the theme of the digital, given its increasing relevance across core subject areas of various research committees, including urban, rural, development, tribal, legal,

and criminological studies. A more focused, detailed, and systematic engagement is required. Equally important are workshops and training sessions on digital skills such as visual sociology, data handling, mining, and modeling. These should involve cross-disciplinary collaboration with computational sciences and other related fields to foster the professional exchange of digital methods and practices. Regional sociological associations should also prioritize digital sociology, engaging seriously with questions of methodology, themes, techniques, and context in its development. At the same time, it is crucial to avoid the proliferation of superficial academic events—now common in seminars and workshops titled ‘Impact of Social Media...’, ‘Digital Society’, etc.—where raw empiricism and common sense often dominate. While such sessions may serve informative or even affective purposes, they tend to sideline the academic responsibility of fostering deep and long-term conceptual, methodological, and organized discussions. Philosophical engagement is essential if we aim to shift from being mere providers of digital raw material to becoming generators of original themes, perspectives, and concepts rooted in our specific social contexts. Ultimately, these and other necessary interventions will help not only in developing the field but also in moving digital sociology beyond the exclusive domains of IITs and other elite institutions, where it has thus far found serious academic attention.

In the policy domain, Indian digital sociology holds significant potential to serve a range of public functions. One of its promising directions lies in evolving as public digital sociology—an approach that applies sociological knowledge to real-world digital issues in order to benefit society. For instance, it can play a vital role in addressing the persistent digital divide in India, particularly in terms of access, skills, and usage across rural and urban populations. By offering empirically grounded insights and context-specific policy recommendations, digital sociology can help bridge these divides and support inclusive digital development in underserved regions.

Moreover, sociologists can contribute meaningfully to policy dialogues on digital literacy, digital wellbeing (including digital addiction and the need for digital detox), and the increasing educational inequalities exacerbated by the uneven penetration of digital technologies. These contributions would not only highlight structural barriers but also offer alternative frameworks rooted in ground-level realities. A critical sociological evaluation of flagship programs such as the Digital India initiative—examined through the lenses of class, caste, gender, region, and age—would enhance public accountability and foster more equitable policy design.

By engaging with such issues, digital sociology could expand its relevance beyond academic circles and assume an important role in shaping public discourse and state policy. In doing so, it would fulfill both the pragmatic and civic responsibilities of the discipline, transforming it into a more active, participatory, and socially responsive field within Indian sociology.

5. Conclusion

As a sub-branch of sociology, digital sociology is gradually gaining traction. Although still in its formative stages—not yet fully institutionalized across all contexts—it is moving through a phase of recognition and realization. Nonetheless, it has already contributed a growing body of scholarship, a rich array of themes for substantive enquiry, diverse methodological approaches, foundational principles, and a vibrant field of scholarly debate. While digital sociology is more firmly established in international academia, it has begun to leave its initial footprints within Indian sociology. However, its broader institutionalization and rightful positioning within the discipline remain a work in progress. The first step toward developing this sub-field in India involves engaging deeply with existing global literature—exploring its themes, trends, and theoretical trajectories—with the goal of building a contextually rooted, informed, comparative and reflective scholarship. As India becomes increasingly digitized, there is a pressing need to accord serious academic attention to the digital—both in research and pedagogy. This attention must be guided by the longstanding intellectual legacy of Indian sociology and social anthropology. Digital sociology in India, therefore, lies at the intersection of emerging global discourses and the culturally grounded sensibilities of Indian social thought. Such an endeavor requires a conscious negotiation with local cultural categories, meanings, and sociological insights into Indian society's structures and processes. It also calls for the critical integration of global developments—across themes, methods, and discourses—to understand how digital transformations are shaping (and being shaped by) India's socio-cultural landscape. Undoubtedly, this task demands a new set of skills, conceptual tools, and a willingness to step beyond traditional comfort zones. Yet, the pursuit holds immense promise for contributing to an emerging and vital field of sociological knowledge.

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